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# Abandoning the Shadows and Seizing the Stage: A Perspective on a Feminine Discourse of Resistance Theatre as Informed by the Work of Susanna Centlivre, Eliza Haywood, Frances Sheridan, Hannah Cowley, and the Sistren Theatre Collective

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Abandoning the Shadows and Seizing the Stage:

A Perspective on a Feminine Discourse of Resistance Theatre as Informed by the Work  
of Susanna Centlivre, Eliza Haywood, Frances Sheridan, Hannah Cowley, and the Sistren  
Theatre Collective

by

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## *Introduction*

Brazilian theatre practitioner Augusto Boal states in his book, *Theatre of the Oppressed*,

...theater is a weapon. A very efficient weapon. For this reason one must fight for it. For this reason the ruling classes strive to take permanent hold of the theater and utilize it as a tool for domination. In so doing, they change the very concept of what 'theater' is. But the theater can also be a weapon for liberation. For that, it is necessary to create appropriate theatrical forms. Change is imperative. (ix)

What Boal illustrates for the reader is that theatre is both a political weapon and a political tool. Whether the artform is wielded violently as a means of domination or skillfully utilized as a method of teaching and mode of bringing about transformation, depends upon putting the correct form of theatre into place. As a result, in considering the presence of the female voice within the theatrical world since the eighteenth century, we must consider whether or not the proper forms have been explored. Over the course of this study, we will consider the true nature and power of theatre as an artform, the placement of the problematized female voice within society, literature, and theatre, and how the theatrical form can create a unique catalyst for the female voice to be considered and implemented. Ultimately, in creating a space for the female voice to be heard, we look to a distinctly feminine discourse of resistance theatre, thus implying that a feminine expression of theatre can be different than a masculine theatre. In order to fully comprehend the nature of this Promethean struggle, we must discuss the placement and relevancy of the foundation eighteenth century theatre provides in our discussion. Then

we will examine four of the women who fought for the validity of the female playwright as a relevant public figure—Susanna Centlivre, Eliza Haywood, Frances Sheridan, and Hannah Cowley. Once we consider their lives and examples of their work, our discussion will explore the importance of resistance in art, the relationship between gender and genre in these texts, and what it would mean to have a specifically feminine discourse in theatre. In continuation of this study, the research then looks to a modern example of another group of “other” voices, the Jamaican women of Sistren, further marginalized by their placement as colonized women, and their contribution to the feminine theatrical canon. The voices presented here all speak from points of location that are as varied and diverse as the women themselves, which points to the development of the unique nature of feminine resistance theatre, thus indicating the need for this study to take place. While considerations of each individual entity exist, although minimal in some cases, the process of combining those analyses into a single process of consideration gives us a new perspective on what these women were able to accomplish, as well as providing a vision for the future. In order to embark on this study with a proper foundation, however, we must begin with a medium for these voices and their resistive nature—the theatre.

*Chapter I: Theatre*

In his article, “A Plea for a Theater of Gusto,” E.J. West states, “And to me theater is an art capable of enabling us to live intensely, to *experience* life with gusto and the full flavor of sensuous reaction to exciting and provocative stimuli” (370). In the realm of theatre, the audience is able to holistically experience a representation of life. As Brazilian theater director, writer, and politician, Augusto Boal stated in Brazil in 2004, “Theatre is a representation, not a reproduction of social reality.” The power of theatre lies in that representation of life, as opposed to the idea that what takes place on stage is a reproduction of life. In witnessing a representation, an audience member is given the ability to imagine a variety of options and a multiplicity of paths, for any given character. A playwright is able to explore what would be considered an “untraditional” path for a character, and what might play out as a result of that unconventional path. By witnessing that reality, this construction gives the audience members the opportunity to work out personally, as well as corporately, what that representation means, as well as what it could mean for the society at large. As bell hooks states in her work *Outlaw Culture*, “You know, the function of art is to do more than tell it like it is – it’s to imagine what is possible” (281). Thus, theatre can be a catalyst for culture to be able to witness a representation of the cultural zeitgeist, as well as explore existing challenges.

In the end, however, with this type of art form there is a level of proactiveness that is required on the part of the witnesses. Within the spectrum of theatre that brings to the forefront socially and politically centered ideas, audience members are to be witnesses and active participants, not purely consumers of what is placed in front of

them. Thus, they must grasp the desire to engage, as well as witness, the power and ability of theatre. Boal further states,

The argument about the relations between theater and politics is as old as theater and...as politics. Since Aristotle, and in fact since long before, the same themes and arguments that are still brandished were already set forth. On one hand, art is affirmed to be pure contemplation, and on the other hand, it is considered to present always a vision of the world in transformation and therefore is inevitably political insofar as it shows the means of carrying out that transformation or of delaying it. (Introduction)

Theatre, like most art, can be dismissed as mere entertainment by a dominant cultural viewpoint. That does not mean that it *is* mere entertainment, but that society has dismissed its ability to be more—a catalyst for examining culture, an engine for social change, a voice from the shadows and fringes of our experiences. More than likely, that denial of the transformative power of theatre lies in the understanding of its true potential power and a subsequent, cognitive attempt to conceal, control, and manipulate that power through denial.

But one might ask, what about theatre can be so inflammatory? Boal states, “The theater, in particular, is determined by society much more stringently than the other arts, because of its immediate contact with the public, and its greater power to convince” (53). Literature has the ability to wait for another generation, for the audience that is prepared to read and grasp the heart of the text. While plays are maintained in written form, the power and essence of their intended form is not captured in black words on a white page. As W.B. Worthen in his article, “Drama, Performativity, and Performance” explores,

Understanding dramatic performance as authorized in a relatively straightforward way by a scripted text does indeed consign theater (and criticism that understand performance to be determined by the text) to some faded conceptual Levittown: dramatic performance is a series of authorized reproductions, each plotted on the blueprint of the authorial text. (1094)

We must fight a restrictive view of dramatic performance, he continues, “We must not be solely concerned with maintaining the priority of texts or with seeing performance merely as a side effect of dramatic writing” (1094). For the most part, if a play reaches the stage within its age and is not accepted, the work is relegated to certain oblivion unless someone chooses to resurface the text. However, in that resurfacing process, normally the text is only resurrected to the level of gaining a critical eye or a basic look at the readable text. What has to occur in order to fully grasp a play’s depth and breadth is for that revisiting to walk the text all the way through the process to the stage with the proper form, based on the purpose of work. Then, and only then, will the intended message and power of that theatrical text be fully grasped.

Theatre, in its original, intended form, is living, breathing, essentially dynamic. One can grasp the core issues and elements of a play by reading the script, but this is ultimately a truncated version of the art form, as opposed to the holistic experience intended by a playwright. This holistic model involves the foundational interaction between the playwright, director, actors, designer, over the course of the preparation process. The ultimate experience, however, takes place between the actors on stage and the audience, which is once again something that is dynamic and changing, depending on



the synergy between the stage and the house, from performance to performance. As a result, the potential for new ideas to be experienced in a living, breathing venue, creates limitless potential for transformation to take a distinctive and powerful hold in the hearts and minds of the audience members. W.R. Chetwood observed in his *General History of the Stage* published in England in 1749 that, “So reasonable an Entertainment, as the Drama in its Purity, must be, in some sort, a Promoter to Virtue” (40). He even goes on to assert that he does “not mean this Admonition to any particular Theatre, but all in general, at Home and Abroad; for our Plantations in America have been voluntarily visited by some Itinerants; Jamaica, in particular” (40). For our consideration, Chetwood points out, as a male voice from the eighteenth century, that the theatre is a powerful and influential tool, one that should be handled with consideration, and also one that should be extended to the entirety of the British Empire. Thus, he lays the foundation for the work of the British women considered in this study to be influential, as well as extending that reality to a post-colonial perspective. As a result, after establishing theatre as an influential voice within society, we can grasp the further power of marginalized voices taking the stage and utilizing this medium to expose and question the reality of their current situation. What Susanna Centlivre, Eliza Haywood, Frances Sheridan, Hannah Cowley, and the women of *Sistren* illustrate for us, is the power of this distinctively literary and interactive artform. Combining the unique qualities of theatre with a willingness to expose political and social injustices provided a distinctive avenue for beginning cultural discussions that would not only empower the authors themselves, but also lay a foundation for those around them to experience freedoms they did not.

*Chapter II: 18<sup>th</sup>. Century Foundation*

In order to truly understand these eighteenth-century authors, and thus the foundation for female playwrights coming after them, we must grasp the context of their work. The eighteenth century in Europe was a period marked by social, cultural, political, and economic unrest and growth, bringing about a series of movements across the world. Men and women became increasingly focused on what was known as the “spirit of the age” and the movement towards democracy, liberal thought, innovation, and the rights and abilities of man. Many became disenchanted with the traditional views of a hierarchical society and the almost incestuous relationship between church, government, and the aristocracy at the top, dictating downwards to the rest of society. For England, in particular, struggles at home and abroad marked this era with questions. Whether debating the virtues and vices of slavery, industrialization, revolutionary movements, issues in science and religion, or venturing into the realm of the gender debates, this was a time of questioning, challenging, and breaking into new frontiers. As the Socratic method of teaching illustrates, questioning can be one of the most effective and poignant methods of bringing about learning and transformation. Thus, the questions of the age, paired with the pluck and guts of the artists of the period, brought about an environment conducive to experiencing new thoughts, ideas, and voices. Because, while “Literature of all kinds almost invariably contributes to the circulation and confirmation of the dominant ideology...literature touches responsive chords in its audience and simultaneously joins other discourses in contesting, subverting, or transforming it” (Backscheider xv-xvi). Thus, throughout this examination, the reader will begin to see that more often than not, the trajectory of a cultural conversation can be backtracked to a

point of origin within the arts, and the eighteenth century was no exception.

The discussions concerning the rights of “men” naturally brought about an examination of another facet of society, women, as resistance concerning women’s placement and purpose permeated the fabric of society and conversation. The anonymous author of the introduction to Susanna Centlivre’s works published in 1760 points out one of the primary questions that surfaced, “A Poet is born so, not made by Rules; and is there not an equal Chance that this Poetical Birth should be female as well as male?” (ix). Women fulfilled a particular role in society by taking on all characteristics that men did not associate with – dependence, frailty, emotionalism, et al. Women were completely dependent on their fathers, then subsequently their husbands, for each aspect of their existence since they had few legal rights and were exposed to only a limited education. As critic Lawrence Stone states about female agency, “women have nearly always been made by men, and have mainly defined what is acceptable behavior by women” (484). Thus, they were not only governed in marriage, but also in their agency and behavior. One author’s description of the heroines written into the literature of the time points to the expectation of women where they were subject to the scenario of “man proposed, God disposed, and woman waited to see what would happen” (Koon 8). Furthermore, women that did venture into the realm of authorship, whether in literature or theatre, often did not claim their work, lest they be considered of questionable morality. Prior to the fourteenth century, the majority of female authors “were almost always nuns or religious women whose isolation made their pronouncements more acceptable” (Fonte xxi). As female authors began to surface, a mixture of reactions bubbled to the surface. F.W. Bateson quotes the “Critick” of *A*

*Comparison between the Two Stages*, as an example of the ferocious opposition that many of these women faced. “What a Pox have the Women to do with the Muses? I hate these Petticoat Authors; ‘tis false Grammar, there’s no Feminine for the Latin word, ‘tis entirely of the Masculine Gender, and the Language won’t bear such a thing as a She-Author” (61).

However, female voices began to emerge from the shadows of obscurity. Referred to by many as the first English feminist author, Mary Astell, published a groundbreaking social commentary in 1700 entitled, *Some Reflections Upon Marriage, Occasion’d by the Duke and Dutchess of Mazarine’s Case; Which is Also Consider’d*. In the piece, Astell delivers a witty and rhetorically engaging critique of the institution of marriage. While past viewpoints of marriage tended to be idealized calls to the one, and primary, destiny of all the fairer sex, Astell utilizes socio-political imagery to call on women to pursue education and other means necessary to better prepare themselves for the “state” of marriage. Her presentation displays marriage for women as a challenge to be entered into with education and awareness of the state of most men and their view of women. For as she states,

But how can a Man respect his Wife when he has a contemptible Opinion of her and her Sex? When from his own Elevation he looks down on them as void of Understanding, and full of Ignorance and Passion, so that Folly and a Woman are equivalent Terms with him? Can he think there is any Gratitude due to her whose utmost services he exacts as strict Duty? Because she was made to be a Slave to his Will, and has no higher end than to Serve and Obey him. (49)

Furthermore, as Chetwood explained in the previous section, this mindset and understanding of women as property, even as slaves, extends to the colonized mindset, thus bringing that worldview to bear in areas such as Jamaica, which we will consider later on. Rather than entering into the microcosm of society that marriage can represent with unknowledgeable, idealistic notions, Astell calls for women to cut themselves from a different cloth. As she states, “She has need of a strong Reason, of a truly Christian and well-temper’d Spirit, of all the Assistance the best Education can give her, and ought to have some good assurance of her own Firmness and Vertue, who ventures on such a Trial” (94). Her call to reasoning and education for women, combined with her biting critiques of society and the primary patriarchal viewpoint of women, solidifies Astell as a leading voice on one of the battlegrounds of the century.

Additionally, Mary Wollstonecraft entered the debate in 1792 with her seminal work, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Wollstonecraft challenges women to combat the limitations imposed on them, proving that women are more than the stereotypical gender roles impressed upon them. This stripping away that Wollstonecraft calls for is not to seize power, but to equip women to have agency over their own existences. As she states, “I do not wish them [women] to have power over men; but over themselves” (63). First and foremost, Wollstonecraft argues that women should be educated. One of the primary reasons for education is that women are responsible for the raising and instruction of children. In addition, if a woman is educated she could serve as a “companion” to her husband, not merely as property or as an ornament. She states, “if she be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue; for truth must be common to all, or it will be

inefficacious with respect to its influence on general practice.” As a result, if she is not educated, she could actually harm the progression of society and the spreading of truth, through not correctly teaching her children. While Wollstonecraft does not directly assert that male and female are equal, her work puts the pieces into place from which further debate could take place. Thus, though her work may seem somewhat moderate within the modern context of gender debates, she provides an example of a text that is often considered, as opposed to the texts we will consider in this study. In addition, her work, although preceded by one of our playwrights, establishes a foundation for others to build on, one that would continue to grow in generations to come.

As women continued to emerge as both readers and authors, although many of the writers belonged to the more privileged groups, an additional layer of voices surfaced from the burgeoning middle class. However, many of these women are over-looked.

The existence in the eighteenth century of these self-supporting women of the middle classes seems to have been disregarded by social historians; and historians of the Press have failed to deal faithfully with early publications addressed to women, referring only in passing to those edited by well-known men or to which they contributed. (Adburgham)

What this insight illustrates for the modern reader is that women of varied social conditions understood the importance and gravity of their position within society and the need to call that placement into question. The reality remained that “The history of writing women in the eighteenth century...is littered with stories of hard-working wives of wastrel husbands who plied their pens in a frantic effort to keep one step ahead of the creditors and put food into the mouths of the little ones” (King 64). In addition, as our

study encompasses the women of Sistren later on, we will see an even further overlooked group of women, ones that are “other” within a post-colonial context, often completely abandoned and required to rely completely on their own abilities. Both groups of women, whether acknowledged or not, saw that there was a gap in society, and then found the strength and ability, within the patriarchal reality of their positioning, to locate and express a voice.

### *The Female Playwright*

In her iconic work, *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf creates a fictional character, Judith Shakespeare, the sister of William Shakespeare, who is gifted with the same talent as her brother. Through the use of this illustration, Woolf explores how talented women, despite their giftings, have not been given space to form identities and express themselves, let alone construct a platform from which to communicate that expression.

To have lived a free life in London in the sixteenth century would have meant for a woman who was a poet and playwright a nervous stress and dilemma which might well have killed her. Had she survived, whatever she had written would have been twisted and deformed, issuing from a strained and morbid imagination. And undoubtedly, I thought, looking at the shelf where there are no plays by women, her work would have gone unsigned. (Woolf 594)

As we push further into the artistic realm of our study, past all the other forms of protest during this time, the London stages of the eighteenth century were graced with an insurgence of the relatively rare phenomenon that Woolf points to, the female playwright.

Throughout history there have been women who chose to resist, some more publicly than others, who refused to remain constricted by the society in which they were born. Many of these women found a home in the arts, specifically theatre. Even in that expression, they were at risk of being questioned even further, as any woman associated with the theatre was looked down upon, primarily by having her virtue questioned. However, a double-consciousness existed in society towards women in the theatre, for while they were frowned upon, the few women that did make it as actresses were placed in a celebrity-like status because of the entertainment they provided and their socialization with the aristocracy. Even with relative economic success for some, as author, Tracy C. Davis observes, “The woman playwright was neither a stable nor an uncontested category” (24). She continues, “Women made gains during the century’s course, but the idea of separate spheres retained discursive force...women’s publicity in horizontal and vertical senses had official, if not real, borders.” Furthermore, a female playwright was an individual of multiple identities:

As a sociable playwright and a representative citizen, the female dramatist entered into a contractual relationship every time she put pen to paper.

She was still a daughter, wife, or mother, with the reciprocally unbalanced legal and caretaking obligations that entailed, negotiating her writing with these responsibilities. She was still a friend, neighbor, and parishioner, with the visitations, exchanges, and observations involved in fulfilling



those roles. Though not a citizen of the state, enfranchised for her opinions, she nevertheless partook in the cultural life of the nation, reading about and performing in its rituals, and by writing also contributing to her class rituals' solidification or evolutionary change... (Davis 29)

Thus, constant negotiation and fluid movement between any and all of her roles defined a female playwright's position in society. As a result, these playwrights existed in a liminal space. A space that called into question their past and present surroundings, but also beckoned the audience to explore the space their works provided, ultimately imagining what could be in the future. This negotiation of identities for female voices does not remain within the eighteenth century, but perpetuates throughout history, as we will see in our look at the women of Sistren. While the work of these female authors was daunting, they were not dissuaded from establishing their presence in and around the stage.

Four women, in particular, made their marks both on the stage, as well as in the social conversations of their day—Susanna Centlivre, Eliza Haywood, Frances Sheridan, and Hannah Cowley. While some might say that they were too radical, simultaneously, others say they were not radical enough. What we can be sure of is the fact that they were doomed to be misrepresented and misunderstood because of the outside nature of their status, the outlier nature of the art form in which they chose to express themselves, and their thus further marginalized texts. While many in the feminist discussion bring up the issues inherent in identifying specific experiences as “representational” of the female experience as a whole, this study of a variety of positions across multiple generations of authors, both brings up the greater issues at hand, while simultaneously not attempting to

sweep universal strokes across the varied lines of marginalization. Those greater issues include gender debates, marriage, female placement, recognition and constriction throughout society. Thus, each of the women covered in this study chose to individualistically define their position within societal and cultural commentary.

### *Susanna Centlivre*

The exact birth year of Susanna Centlivre is unknown, probably somewhere between 1667 & 1670. We do know that she died in 1723, after producing nineteen plays as one of the most popular comedic playwrights of her century. Her life before her writing career began in London around 1700 is relatively ambiguous, although what is certain is that she made a name for herself as a writer, with no literary or social connections (Warren 609). Centlivre was once described as “an excellent craftsman for the stage, a precise observer of social trends” (Rogers qtd in Warren 609). However, these successes were not marked by a smooth sailing through the distinctively patriarchal authorial landscape of the London theatre. Centlivre, along with other female playwrights, were forced to “negotiate their positions as authors and their claims to literary authority in a culture that still valued classical redactions as evidence of good breeding and literary merit” (Markley 651). Navigating a landscape hostile towards female presence, Centlivre struggled to make a living by her work, having to remain anonymous on some of her pieces until she found security in a marriage (Warren 611). In the first collection of her works, published in 1760, the introduction illustrates the barriers Centlivre encountered,

She was even asham'd to proclaim her own great Genius, probable

because the Custom of the Times discountenanced poetical Excellence in a Female. The Gentlemen of the Quill published it not, perhaps envying her superior Talents; and her Bookseller, complying with national Prejudices, put a fictitious Name to her *Love's Contrivance*, thro' Fear that the Work shou'd be condemned, if known to be Feminine. With modest Diffidence she sent her Performances, like Orphans, into the World, without so much as a Nobleman to protect them; but they did not need to be supported by Interest, they were admired as soon as they were known, their real Standard, Merit, brought crowding Spectators to the Play-houses, and the female Author, though unknown, heard Applauses, such as have since been heaped on that great Author and Actor *Colley Cibber*. (vii-viii)

Thus, as a successful comedian that struggled through the obstacles of a woman writing in a man's world, Centlivre's work emerges as a distinctive voice in her age as she attempted to take part in creating a more "*woman-friendly* culture" (Fowler 35). As the anonymous author to the 1760-1761 edition of her collected works decried, "See here the Effects of Prejudice, a Woman who did Honour to the Nation, suffer'd because she was a Woman. Are these Things fit and becoming a free-born People, who call themselves polite and civilized!" (7).

Author F.W. Bateson states that, "Mrs. Centlivre, quite rightly, has not fared well at the hands of critics. She was sneered at by Cibber and by Pope; she was patronized by the *Biographia Dramatica*; and more recently Mr. G.H. Nettleton has shaken a professorial head over the indecency of her plays" (75). However, as he continues to dissect her work and point out the few critics that do approach her texts with a measure of

positivity, he ends up turning back on himself. While he states that she deserves the critique, he concludes that the “vague aroma of *double entendres*” for which she is morally questioned are actually the “flavour to the plays” and “the spices in the comic soup” (75). As a result, we can see the illustration of a double standard still at work in the criticism of Susanna Centlivre. However, some critics, such as Maggie B. Gale and Viv Gardner in their work *Women, Theatre and Performance: New Histories, New Historiographies*, have begun to approach Centlivre with a more gracious eye, stating that,

the gender-biased accusations of a lack of theatrical wit and literary originality which have plagued Centlivre’s critical career need to be re-contextualised by locating her plays in relation to both the theatre of her day and the complex layers of theatrical codes at work at any one time in that theatre. (3)

Thus, in this analysis we will look to a consideration of both the context from which Centlivre produced her work, as well as further understanding of what her text could present to the audience. At the beginning of her comedic career, Centlivre is cited as saying, “I think the main design of Comedy is to make us laugh” (Warren 611).

However, one could say that a shift occurred in her approach, as in the introduction to her work *The Gamester* in 1705, she states, “it is her intention to correct a social vice” (Warren 611). The social vice she is primarily referring to here is gambling; however, as we continue with this particular reading of her work, that outlook may extend to other areas of life as well. One of the primary things that the playwright is able to put on display for the reader is the societal shift from an economy centered on land, to one

founded on the liquid asset of ready money. This economic shift was indicative of the cultural shift from an agrarian lifestyle, to a more urban lifestyle, which brings about a different set of values for society. “In this new arrangement, social station could conceivably rise and fall as quickly – and randomly – as the roll of a gamester’s dice” (Herrell 31). That is the over-arching theme of the work, as we delve deeper into the texts and analysis of the characters, the further social commentary will emerge.

In order to grasp what Centlivre accomplishes in this subtle, yet effective social critique, we must consider the storyline as well as the analysis. The title character of the play is a degenerate gambler, Valere, who is in love with an heiress, Angelica. Angelica returns his affections, but loathes his gambling. As in any comedy of the era, the complicated swirl of love encompasses multiple characters. Thus, Valere has an uncle, Dorante, that is also in love with Angelica, and even attempts to coerce her servant, Favourite, into helping him. Furthermore, Angelica’s sister, the widowed Lady Wealthy, is also in love with Valere. However, the Lady Wealthy has her own set of suitors in Mr. Lovewell and the Marquis of Hazard.

The plot centers around the relationship between Valere and Angelica, fraught by the constant intrusion of Valere’s gambling. In an early interchange between Favourite and Hector, Valere’s servant, Favourite points out that Angelica is aware of Valere’s recent escapades and intends to not see Valere anymore. In response, Hector states that “If he has lost his Money, this News will break his Heart” (8). Thus revealing Valere’s priorities from the opening scene. Not long after, we learn from the continued conversation between the servants that Valere’s father cut him off and turned him out of the family home. As a result, his obsession is interfering not only with his basic

priorities, but with his ability to participate in the family legacy. Next, Centlivre further emphasizes her point by actually calling for Valere to physically display his inward chaos by having him enter the stage “in Disorder” (9). In a broader sense, Valere’s actions have cost him the ability to call himself a gentleman. Favourite illustrates this truth for the audience by discussing his master’s state, “Yes, yes, I guess the Business; he is at shaking his Elbows over a Table, saying his Prayers backwards, courting the Dice like a Mistress, and cursing them when he is disappointed” (8). In addition, throughout the play, Valere makes vows and promises of reform to Angelica, yet his claims are never substantiated by transformative actions, thus he is not a man of his word. Our title character, in a work concerning the upper class, typifies someone who has completely abandoned his duties as a gentleman of society.

What becomes apparent over the course of this work is that Centlivre makes the female, Angelica, the moral center of the play (Herrell 51). The primary plotline is completely defined by the tension between Valere choosing to reform or continuing on his path towards destruction. Finally, at the end of Act 3, Angelica resolves to give one final effort in reclaiming Valere.

For when from Ill a Proselyte we gain,  
 The goodness of the Act rewards the Pain:  
 But if my honest Arts successless prove,  
 To make the Vices of his Soul remove,  
 I'll die – or rid me from this Tyrant Love. (43)

Thus, our female heroine strikes out with a plan to reclaim the man she loves or she will abandon the relationship altogether. As a result, Centlivre reverses the traditional social

order, but primarily with a focus on the reversal of normative gender roles, especially during this period. The woman is positioned as rescuer and redeemer, the agent of change, the moral standard, the “gentleman” in her world. Furthermore, Angelica’s plan to beat Valere at his own vice involves her actually dressing like a man and entering into a game. Angelica plays her part well, successfully fitting into the group of men, and actually beating a hyper-emotional Valere. Thus, Centlivre creates a female character that is intelligent, astute, a creative thinker, as well as someone who is able to adapt and fulfill multiple purposes. Each of these characteristics stand in contrast to the generally accepted notions of women, their mental acuity, ability to be educated in a variety of subjects, and their usefulness outside of certain “feminine” roles, such as being a wife and mother. Earlier in the play Angelica gave Valere a bejeweled portrait of herself, which served as a symbol of what he values. When the disguised Angelica beats Valere, he is forced to give up the portrait and believes that, as he acknowledges, “There’s no going near Angelica. The Action I have carries such a Face, that she can ne’er forgive me” (57). However, after Valere says goodbye to Angelica forever, she has personal change of heart stating, “Shall I see him ruin’d? –no– that would barbarous beyond Example. –*Valere*, come back. Should I forgive you all – Would my Generosity oblige you to a sober Life? – Can you, upon Honour...forsake that Vice that brought you to this low Ebb of Fortune?” (66). Thus, in the end, Angelica takes Valere’s word and welcomes him back, despite the fact that his promises and vows have meant nothing in the past.

While many refer to *The Gamester* as a typical reform comedy that is too didactic, what Centlivre is able to highlight through this form and delivery style is the current

affair of her present society and how virtue, gender roles, and the institution of marriage are affected by wealth. What the audience is confronted with in Valere's curtain speech is whether or not he has truly reformed—

Now Virtue's pleasing Prospect's in my View,  
 With double Care I'll all her Paths pursue;  
 And proud to think I owe this Change to you  
 Virtue that gives more solid Peace of Mind,  
 Than Men in all their vicious Pleasures find;  
 Then each with me the Libertine reclaim,  
 And shun what sinks his Fortune, and his Fame.

Although he says the right words, one cannot help but wonder if he will actually reform into a gentleman and man of his word. What one can also wonder from this scenario is whether or not a woman would be afforded the same grace and mercy that is extended to Valere. According to existing standards, the audience could assume that had the roles been reversed, Angelica would have been thrown out, disavowed, declared without virtue, and, more than likely, unfit to marry. As the audience, the reality we are confronted with is that Centlivre has structured Valere's character and his journey over the course of the play to indicate that it is unlikely that he will actually change. Thus, while the work is a comedy, there is a shadow cast over the storyline, because we can already see the poor union between Valere and Angelica.

Following Valere's somewhat vapid declaration of reform, there is an epilogue. The text does not clearly state who exactly speaks the epilogue, but we can tell that the speaker is intended to be a woman. In a powerful reading, one could insert the actress



that portrays Angelica, thus further emphasizing the pessimistic overtones concerning this matrimony. As the epilogue concludes,

You fly this Place like an infectious Air,  
 To yonder happy Quarter of the Town,  
 You crowd; and your own fav'rite Stage disown;  
 We're like old Mistresses, you love the Vice,  
 And hate us only 'cause we once did please. (71)

As a result, in the end, although Centlivre declared gambling to be one of the greatest vices in all of England, this focused reading suggests that she is also pointing out another vice of society—the marriage of such couples as Valere and Angelica. Where a strong, competent, financially-stable woman, chooses to enter into a union with a gamester, who will more than likely ruin them, all for the sake of love and marriage. Centlivre appears to be inviting the audience to consider, to interact with this dark comedy, and to wrestle with their own value systems concerning the placement of women and the power of wealth in society. In the end, Centlivre refused to step away from the stage, despite the harsh criticism she received. Instead, she continued to write plays that would bring about discussion, and, as illustrated by critics taking the time to even express an opinion about her work, make a last impact on her sphere.

### *Eliza Haywood*

Eliza Haywood, known primarily for her novels, was born in approximately 1693 and died in 1756. According to author Christine Blouch, “Little is known about

Haywood's biography, and brief as it is, a good part of the received account has proved inaccurate" (535). As author Kathryn King states, "To know Haywood, we must turn our attention to the public life" (xii). Thus, although her biography is marked by a lack of information, that does not mean we cannot still explore her work and appreciate her level of understanding concerning the social, political, and cultural climate of her time, as well as her willingness to write within that context. In fact, it is only through her work that we can truly attempt to get to know precisely who Eliza Haywood was, not just as daughter, mistress, or mother, but as a female author. In fact, Haywood's work shows us that, although marginal and resisted, there was a place for women's writing.

Haywood's long, varied, and productive career is in itself evidence that there was a market for women's writing, an appetite for their perspective and opinion, and that certain discourses – of spirituality, morality, romance, and domesticity – were authorized for their use because they were considered within the realm of women's knowledge. But Haywood's rhetorical practices also reveal that a woman's entry into the literary marketplace was fraught with risk. (Merritt 6)

Although Haywood led a career that was often viewed as marked by constant shifting political positions, possibly to maintain her income, recent viewpoints call for a broader perspective of her work. Author Juliette Merritt states that "Haywood studies have arrived at a point at which we can begin to take the long view of her career and recognize that she sustained a set of preoccupations and strategies over the course of nearly forty years as a professional writer" (5). The "long view" that Merritt refers to is

what Kathryn R. King seeks to develop in her 2012 biography of Haywood, because, as she states,

Haywood's political positions were complex and shifting, to some degree situational; the desire to pin a political label on one or another text is understandable but reductive and tends towards the production of decontextualized readings that in my view create a distorted picture of the political life considered as a whole. (7)

Thus, while Haywood “may have written primarily to earn a living...this does not preclude another, quite different agenda: to enter into public discourse and participate in the circulation of ideas in her society – especially those related to change, progress, and protest” (Merritt 99). In addition, despite the questions that may exist about what label we might fix upon her in hindsight, we do know that within her works of “romances, satires and political journalism from the mid-1730s onwards she uses the codes and conventions developed for the analysis of gendered power relations to take on an expanded range of social and political questions” (King 9).

Despite the lack of knowledge concerning her private life, we do know that her theatrical journey began with acting and eventually took her into the realm of writing. She left the stage for novels, but only to return to her first love in 1729. Her work, *The Companion to the Theatre*, was subtitled “A view of our most celebrated dramatic pieces: in which the plan, characters, and incidents of each are particularly explained. Interspersed with remarks historical, critical, and moral” (qtd in Blouch 541). Haywood wrote plays of her own marked by social, political, and cultural commentary. One author, in discussing the issue of wife-pandering, states,

More than feminist statements about the injustices of marriage, these plays show how the willingness to sell something which one has in principle agreed to protect and care for manifests a darker urge in society to sacrifice anything for money. Behn, Haywood, and Fielding use this titillating image to comment on political and social irresponsibility and the declining power of the individual to combat it or to make a difference. (Wilputte 462)

In 1724 Haywood thrust herself into the public sphere as an actress in one of her own plays, *A Wife to be Lett*. Many believe that the relative success of the play can be attributed to the author's own presence on stage, as she fulfilled the role of Mrs. Graspall (Whicher 8). In this complex piece, Mrs. Graspall's husband attempts "to sell her for £2000" (Merritt 96). While many have expressed that the complexity of Haywood's story hinders the popularity, I believe that in the prologue to this work, the author leaves no doubt with her audience as to what she feels about her own writing, as well as the skill and position of the female pen,

Criticks! be dumb to-night – no Skill display;  
 A dangerous Woman-Poet wrote the Play:  
 One, who not fears your Fury, tho prevailing,  
 More than your Match, in every thing, but Railing.  
 Give her fair Quarter, and when'er she tries ye,  
 Safe in Superior Spirit, she defies ye:  
 Measure her Force, by her known Novels, writ  
 With manly Vigour, and with Woman's Wit.

Then tremble, and depend, if ye beset her,

She, who can talk so well, may act yet better. (v)

Once again indicative of the period, the audience is presented with a maze of romances, specifically three separate plots. The primary story we are concerned with here is that of Mrs. Graspall and her husband's selling of her to a charming man, Sir Harry Beaumont for £2000. At the beginning of the play, Mrs. Graspall's character bemoans the life that she lives as a woman, "O! to what Fate are wretched Women born! Condemn'd to Slavery, tho' conscious of superior Merit, and bound to obey severe Dictates of a very Fool, when e'er the Name of Husband gives'em Force" (13). However, after all that has taken place, Mrs. Graspall is the one that experiences a transformation. She reprimands him, "Did you not sell me? lett me out to Hire, and forc'd my trembling Vertue to obey – Did I not kneel, and weep, and beg – but you had receiv'd the Price you set me at, and I must yield or be turn'd out a Beggar" (66). Then, in a plot twist, she turns the tables on her husband, giving the £2000 to another person. As she states, "You shall find what'tis to have a vicious Wife – Do you not now repent what you have done, and wish I cou'd resume my Virtue" (67). Mrs. Graspall's story illustrates an extreme scenario where a man actually sells his domestic situation, including his wife. However, considering the priority of ready money during this period, while Haywood's plot line might seem extreme, the emotion behind the situation is accurate, since women were treated as mere property. If one follows that line of reasoning in a downward progression, such a scenario is neither unimaginable or all that shocking.

A sub-plot to consider within the text takes place towards the beginning of the play, when Amadea appears to Mrs. Graspall. Amadea, as a former lover of Sir Harry

Beaumont, wants to question Mrs. Graspall concerning her relationship, so she dresses as a man and confronts her. Mrs. Graspall's character listens to what Amadea, dressed as a man, has to say, even accepting her statement that "tis your good Genius warns thro' my Lips," thus claiming the position as her own conscience. Thus, as the audience, we may feel as though there is somewhat of a bond between the women here, especially when Amadea vows to keep the situation to herself, "Madam, farewell, and rest assur'd, whatever my Thoughts are, my Tongue, but to yourself, shall on this Theme be dumb for ever" (14). However, Mrs. Graspall believes that she is talking to a man, thus Haywood presents the audience with an interesting gender-relation tensions. Would Mrs. Graspall have accepted another woman claiming to be her conscience? Why does Mrs. Graspall so willingly respond to a strange man that wants to discuss and question her honor? These questions are a part of the power of Haywood's narratives, as she takes the problems of society and places them candidly into the laps of the audience, directing them to sort through these questions in their own minds and hearts. I agree with author Helene Koon when she points out that "Her women are neither plastic nor passive, but intelligent creatures who, accepting the fact that they have been born into a world they cannot control, seek acceptable modes for survival" (8). Her method of resistance was to show women in the midst of the circumstances, looking for means by which to survive and resist, within their context. In my opinion, Haywood's characters point the reader towards a different positioning than a radical revolutionary, but a subtle attempt to negotiate the circumstances in which these females find themselves. As a result, Haywood becomes another facet of our developing multi-faceted perspective of feminine resistance theatre.

*Frances Sheridan*

Frances Sheridan was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1724, and lost her mother soon after. Despite her father's protests, Sheridan's brothers taught her to write and by the age of 15 she had written her first novel (Hager 223). She is remembered primarily as the mother of the playwright and politician Richard Brinsley Sheridan; however, Frances continued writing until her death in 1766, becoming a successful author of novels and plays in her own right. She was encouraged in her writing by many prominent authorial friends, including Samuel Johnson and Samuel Richardson (Hager 223). As author Isobel Grundy states that women like Sheridan "had proved that plays by women could still succeed" (9). That success, however, was still fraught by discrimination, both in her lifetime and by history itself. Some of her works include *The Discovery* (1763), *The Dupe* (1764), and *A Journey to Bath* (1765).

*The Discovery* remains one of Sheridan's most successful plays, with a first run of seventeen nights and multiple revivals. Furthermore, unlike many of her predecessors and contemporaries, Sheridan's play went through multiple publications, individually and even included in a few anthologies as well. However, outside of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, "Mrs. Sheridan's comedy has had no discoverable editions or productions, and it appears in none of the modern anthologies of eighteenth-century drama," which "is a pity because it is better than a number of plays that do get reprinted, among them some tedious things by Addison, Steele, Lillo, Cibber, Kelly, and Cumberland" (Hogan 23). Despite criticism concerning the complexity of the text, the relatively weak second half, and a somewhat contrived ending, one cannot deny that her work influenced her present theatre community and continued to, even in years to come.

According to the actor, playwright, and manager of the famous Drury Lane Theatre, David Garrick, *The Discovery* was “one of the best comedies he knew” even producing and acting in the original performance himself (Finberg xxix).

From the onset of the prologue, we see a similar introduction to that of Haywood, immediately pointing to the male domination of the writing world.

A female culprit at your bar appears,  
 Not destitute of hope, nor free from fears.  
 Her utmost crime she's ready to confess,  
 A simple trespass—neither more nor less;  
 For, truant-like she rambled out of bounds,  
 And dar'd to venture on poetic grounds.  
 The fault is deem'd high-treason by the men,  
 Those lordly tyrants who usurp the pen!  
 Then try the vile monopoly to hide  
 With flattering arts, ‘You, ladies, have beside  
 ‘So many ways to conquer—sure ‘tis fit  
 ‘You leave to us that dangerous weapon wit!’  
 For women, like state criminals, they think  
 Should be debarr'd the use of pen and ink. (2)

Thus, even if we stopped with a close reading of her prologue, Sheridan's concern for the placement of women in society, and her willingness to publicly comment, is both apparent and poignant. However, she continues her social commentary throughout her



work. *The Discovery*, similar in structure and content to other works of her age, presents a multi-layered exploration of marriage and imposed matchmaking.

Cutting through the various plot lines, the character that emerges as the primary receptor of Sheridan's commentary is Lord Medway, who is positioned as a villainous character in almost every situation he is in. Medway is the picture of the rakish, old, crank that seeks to marry his children off to the best social placement, in order to salvage what he can of his own misappropriated and lost fortune. Once again, we see the use of children, as property and pawns for social and monetary gain. While the scenario of a father attempting to use his children, both male and female, to redeem his own misfortune is not new or groundbreaking for this period, Sheridan deftly navigates what could be considered a "stock" plotline with a fresh air of comic wit. Her own mastery of the English language is what sets Sheridan apart from her contemporaries.

The conclusion of the play is what draws many of the critiques, marking the ending as "pure theatrical device" (Hogan 23). In a plot twist of massive proportions, Lord Medway's son, Colonel Medway, after finally agreeing to marry the woman that his father foists upon him, Mrs. Knightly, discovers that said lady is actually his sister. Lord Medway had an affair while abroad with the military and Mrs. Knightly is the product of his liaison. In the end, each couple is able to choose their respective partner and they all live happily ever after. Even Lord Medway himself proclaims, "And you are all to congratulate me, upon a double occasion; first, on that of being perfectly blessed in domestick joys; and next, that of seeing me a thoroughly reformed man" (139). While this device is contrived by all standards of storytelling and script development, that does not mean that the social commentary is any less poignant. Often some of the most basic

storylines can express ultimate, vibrant truths through exaggeration and satire, which is what I believe these characters portray. While some audience members may not have grasped her point, the potential still exists for Sheridan's critique of arranged marriages based on class, social status, or family connection to take hold, especially within the context of the unpredictability of a patriarchal system built on a foundation of the permissiveness of promiscuity within a culture that does not inherently value women as more than property.

In conclusion, the epilogue both acknowledges the divide in gender positions and makes a critical attempt "To reconcile both sexes to the play." She continues,

For, while the prologue bids our own be Sov'reign,  
 The scenes instruct the other how to govern.  
 A harmless plot – with credit to dismiss  
 The piece – you know the Ladies never hiss.  
 And tho' they should condemn it, yet the men sure  
 Will leave a woman's faults to women's censure.  
 They, prone to meekness, charity, and love,  
 Are always silent where they can't approve.  
 But if to loud applause we dare to aim,  
 It is the men must ratify our claim. (140)

Thus, Sheridan's perspective provides an exaggerated and overdone, yet witty, development of a plot that puts some of the major domestic issues on display—arranged marriage, male promiscuity, and restriction of the female identity and voice.

*Hannah Cowley*

Hannah Cowley lived from 1743-1809. According to sources, her career began as a result of attending a theatrical performance with her husband, where she proclaimed, “Why I could write as well myself!” Her husband’s laughter at her exclamation served as a challenge to her, she returned home and began to write the work that would eventually develop into the comedy, *The Runaway*, published in 1776 (Gagen 107). Cowley first sent the work to David Garrick, the acclaimed playwright, actor, and manager, who encouraged Cowley, and ultimately became a mentor to her and other female playwrights of the period (Finberg & Cadden 1). Cowley wrote nine comedies, one farce, one interlude, and two tragedies, although her comedies were her most successful works. Her two most popular pieces are *The Belle’s Stratagem* (1780), the work considered here, and “one of the twelve main pieces most often performed during the last quarter of the eighteenth century,” and *Who’s the Dupe?* (1779), “one of the twelve afterpieces most often performed during that period” (East 259A). The dramatists Richard Sheridan and George Colman are the only other two authors that can also claim to be represented on both the main piece and afterpiece lists (East 259A).

For the purpose of this analysis, focus will be turned to one work in particular, *The Belle’s Stratagem*. The main plot consists of the relationship between Letitia Hardy and Doricourt, who were contracted in marriage as children. They have not seen one another in years; however, and now it is time for them to be married. Although Doricourt intends to honor his contract, he is somewhat disappointed when he is reintroduced to Letitia stating, “Why, she’s only a fine girl—Complexion, Shape, and Features,—nothing more!” (12). Doricourt, who has recently returned from traveling on the continent,

believes that a woman should have “Spirit! Fire! *l’air enjoué!* that Naiveté—something, nothing, which everybody sensates, and which nobody can describe” (12). Letitia, on the other hand, is as attracted to Doricourt as ever, but recognizes his indifference towards her. She states, “The blooming boy who left his Image in my young heart, is at four and twenty improved in every Grace that fixed him there. It is the same face that my memory, or my fancy, constantly painted—its Expression more heightened, its Graces more finished” (18). Letitia decries the flattery of men that she has received over her life because, “Have I not heard a thousand times of my Air, my Eyes, my Shape—all made for Victory! and to day, when I bent my whole Heart on one conquest, I have proved that those imputed charms are nothing, for—Doricourt saw them unmoved!” (18). Despite the encouragements of her companion, Mrs. Rackett, to be content in his willingness to marry her, Letitia is unwilling to marry a man that does not desire her. Thus, she devises a plan, stating, “I am determined to touch his heart! or never to be his wife!” (19). The plan is, essentially, to turn Doricourt’s indifference into dislike, for, according to Letitia, “‘tis much easier to convert a sentiment into its Opposite, than to transform indifference into tender passion” (22). Practically, the plan is for Letitia to appear before Doricourt as unrefined and simple, which she does, to Doricourt’s dismay. He is ready to leave town, but Mrs. Rackett, obviously privy to Letitia’s plan, convinces Doricourt to delay his journey until after the masquerade that evening.

At the masquerade, Doricourt falls in love with a masked dancer who dances “divinely---charming!” (57). The masked dancer is Letitia. Following the masquerade, in an attempt to hasten things, Letitia’s father feigns a serious illness, making his final wish to see Letitia married. Doricourt chooses to do the honorable thing, despite his

newfound love for the unknown woman, and marries Letitia. Not long after the wedding, Letitia dons her disguise from the masquerade and appears to Doricourt, distraught over his marriage, stating that she would have been just as worthy of a bride, from equal family and fortune. Doricourt distressed by this, declares that he has been “driven from Joy, Felicity, and Life” (86). On hearing Doricourt declare so much passion for another woman, Mr. Hardy suddenly emerges from his sickened state, chastising Doricourt. Doricourt implores the masked lady to unveil herself so that he may have an image to imprint on his mind forever. Once the truth is revealed, Doricourt is delighted, declaring, “Rapture! Transport! Heaven!” (87). He goes on to say that “Your penetration discovered that you won not my Heart at the first interview; but, you now have my whole Soul—your person, your face, your Mind, I would not exchange for those of any other woman breathing” (87). Thus, presenting a man that, despite the fact that he originally thought he was perpetuating the institution of marrying for duty, now declares that he will have no other woman in the world. Furthermore, in his declaration to Letitia he includes his love of her whole being, including her mind, a concept not often verbalized in this period.

In addition, there is a subplot, focusing on the relationship between Sir George Touchwood and Lady Frances Touchwood. In contrast to the relations of Doricourt and Letitia, the Touchwoods exemplify the marriage of a naïve woman, inexperienced in the ways of the life of Fashion, to a man deeply in love and prone to jealousy, as a result of his affection. Thus, Cowley highlights another type of marriage—a sheltered woman with a husband that while in love with her, is prone to be possessive in nature. Lady Touchwood’s innocence is a magnet for the men of Fashion who seek out women, such

as her, to conquest. Through a series of events, Lady Touchwood is almost compromised by a man named Courtall, but disaster is avoided by trickery. The Touchwood's relationship provides another view of marriage, an optimistic one, where both parties are mutual in respect and love.

*The Belle's Stratagem* was received with great acclaim and in 1782 London's *The Critical Review* stated the work was "the best dramatic production of a female pen...since the days of Centlivre, to whom Mrs. Cowley is at least equal in fable and character, and far superior in easy dialogue and purity of diction" (qtd in Gagen 107). Despite the professional praise of a highly respected publication as *The Critical Review*, the resistance to female presence in the realm of playwriting is clearly evident. Not only that, but also the subject matter represented in these works, and their commentary on gender relations, marriage, and family life, points to larger societal issues at hand. While some have hailed *The Belle's Stratagem* as a progressive standard for a new woman, capable, intelligent, unwilling to marry for duty alone, others have yet remained reserved in their acclaim of Cowley as a feminist standard-bearer. Author Wendy Arons, takes one such stance, arguing that while tackling gender issues, Cowley presents "contradictory messages about female desire" (252). According to sources, Cowley, who was known for her modesty, "publically distanced herself from the 'politics' of Mary Wollstonecraft" and thus has been, by some, set-aside as "less progressive and liberating" (Arons 252). However, I believe you can view Cowley's work from yet another position. Considering the societal notion that the realm of theatre was inherently base and immoral, one cannot not be surprised that Cowley remains fiercely domestic, in order to maintain her reputation, while also presenting herself as the antithesis of what many expected of

theatrical women. Essentially, Arons states that Letitia, in her changing herself in order to gain Doricourt's true love and affection, has chosen to define herself in reference to the male gaze. She cites Letitia's response to Doricourt when he asks what she would do if she loved her husband and he, in turn was worthy of her love, as the ultimate proof of Letitia's seeking to make herself into the woman Doricourt desires to marry:

Why then, I would be anything—or all; Grave, Gay, Capricious,—the soul of Whim, the spirit of Variety. Live with him in the eye of Fashion, or in the shade of Retirement. Change my country, my sex. Feast with him in an Esquimaux hut, or in a Persian pavilion. Join him in the victorious War-dance on the borders of Lake Ontario, or sleep to the soft breathings of the flute in the Cinnamon Groves of Ceylon. Dig with him in the Mines of Golconda, or enter the dangerous precincts of the gorgeous Palace of the Mogul, cheat him of his wishes—and overturn his empire! to restore the Husband of my heart to the blessings of Liberty and Love! (63)

Although Letitia is willing to form herself into the woman that her husband desires her to be, she is making this decision out of true, passionate love. Letitia claims that she would not enter into a loveless marriage, thus devised a plan to make this man fall in love with her. If Doricourt had not fallen for her, one must assume, given the nature of this character, that she would not have entered into marriage. As a result, while the conjecture of Letitia being defined by the male gaze is correct, that definition comes, as a result of Letitia's permission. If looking to the discussion of agency and authority, as often is the case in discussions of female characters, Letitia's agency over herself is overwhelming. Doricourt's main expression of agency is that Letitia does not inspire him

on their first meeting. For the rest of the play, he is merely subject to his feelings and passions, lending himself to be a relatively weak male character. Doricourt is the one who takes on the “responsibility” of marrying without desire, but from the onset of the play, Letitia shows no intention of entering into such an arrangement. She states, “never to be his wife will afflict me less, than to be his wife and not be beloved” (38). In addition, the characters of Letitia’s father and Mrs. Rackett show another male-female binary, where the strength of the woman overwhelms the man. Letitia and Mrs. Rackett are the ones who develop the plans, in the case of Letitia, and keep them moving, in the case of Mrs. Rackett, who is the one who convinces Doricourt to delay his trip in order to stay for the ball. In addition, at one point, when discussing the plans, Mrs. Rackett tells Mr. Hardy, “Now I beg, Mr. Hardy, you wont interfere in this business, it is a little out of your way” (38). The idea that the women are the ones in authority, using the men as pawns to make their plans come to pass, is revolutionary, but hidden, in some respects, by the comic nature of the play. One could say that, depending on the director, this play could be rendered in an almost satirical fashion when it comes to male and female relations. Thus, the character with the most personal agency explicitly displayed is Letitia, even if it is expressed with the end result of her marrying. Despite the fact that this is not the ideal level of liberation a modern mind might hope for a woman, it is a relatively freeing idea, considering the social strictures of the patriarchal culture in which Cowley was writing. For some women of this time, to marry for love, rather than social, political, and monetary motives, would be the ultimate freedom.

Thus, veiled by writings concerning domesticity and marriage life, Cowley “fought the trap of her cultural positioning” (Cima 41). Cowley does not seek to engage



a revolutionary approach that might be misconstrued as attempting to overthrow the patriarchal culture of her time. Rather, Cowley's work serves to open the floor for discussions concerning marriage, love, and societal conventions, concerning gender roles. Whether or not she meant for these discussions to take place in her lifetime, or to merely lay dormant until a time when society was ready, Cowley's personal life, as well as her work, provides poignant cultural commentary. Whether or not she openly professed support for those taking on the gender debate, her actions by pushing backing the boundaries, to step out of the domestic and into the public sphere of playwriting speaks volumes. Not only that, but to retain her reputation, while venturing out is a feat, not matched by many. As a critic of the time stated concerning Cowley's life, "For to be public as a GENIUS, and private as a WOMAN, is to wear laurels gracefully veiled" (qtd in Cima 41).

#### *Conclusion: An 18<sup>th</sup> Century Perspective*

As previously pointed out, two primary points of discussion that consistently emerge in any discussion of female authorship are identity and voice. The formation of identity is a complicated process that the women of the eighteenth century consistently confronted. They constantly warred, both internally and externally, with an imposed identity, founded on societal presuppositions concerning their purpose and abilities. While each of the women explored in the previous section experienced varied levels of exposure, their act alone remains a testament to the power of choosing to write as a female. Even if they were not identified as female in their time, our modern knowledge of their true identity allows their work to resonate, even in a retrospective manner.

However, while the act of writing is, in and of itself, a mode of both identification and expression, these authors pushed beyond a basic act. Once they formed an identity, the authors produced a resistive voice. Whether considering Centlivre's reversal of typical gender roles, Haywood's implementation of subtle resistance, Sheridan's satirical depictions of relationships, or Cowley's development of the female power of choice, each author expresses a distinctive voice of resistance. Furthermore, those voices emerge from within the construct of the dominant form—the English language. While the language they utilize is not resistive, they do provide the space for dual readings. By writing individuals, relationships, and scenarios that can be interpreted in a variety of ways, these women have produced a subtle tension of resistance within the text, which is left up to the reader to fully interpret.

In looking at the work of these four authors, both elements of identity and voice emerge as groundbreaking developments on the long journey of the female author throughout history. While the women of *Sistren* in the following section benefited from the development of a community with a unified, supported purpose, the eighteenth-century playwrights were relatively isolated. In the end, those relatively secluded voices, speaking from their liminal space of identification, successfully laid a foundation of social, political, and cultural resistance in theatre by women.

*Chapter III: A Modern Look—The Women of Sistren*

As we consider the works of female playwrights that blazed the trail of social, political, and cultural commentary from a feminine voice on stage, this study looks to build the bridge between the past and present by considering examples of modern women that courageously continued this unique form of resistance. One text, *Lionheart Gal: Life Stories of Jamaican Women*, points the reader to the same spirit with which our eighteenth century authors chose to challenge and resist, within a further marginalized context. In addition, this text illustrates a group of women that would be considered even further outside of the purely “female” and “playwright” appellations, as women born into a nation marked by colonization. While this text does not represent an outlined script in the form that our previously discussed authors have, the monologue nature of these women’s accounts point to the fact that they are both written by women of the theatre and naturally performative, thus applicable to our discussion and connected to the texts of the playwrights already discussed.

At the heart of the text, *Lionheart Gal*, are two core concepts – storytelling and questioning. *Lionheart Gal* is the product of a project taken on by the women of the theatre collective, Sistren, and edited by Honor Ford-Smith. Founded in 1977, Sistren was composed of women who were brought together as a part of an “emergency employment programme” put in place by the democratic socialist government that was in power in Jamaica from 1972-1980 (Sistren xxii). Honor Ford-Smith was commissioned to direct a play for a concert; thirteen women from the employment program were present at the first meeting, and they determined that “We want to do plays about how we suffer as women. We want to do plays about how men treat us bad” (Sistren xxii). Thus,

Sistren launched and eventually emerged as a controversial and powerful voice in Jamaica on women and their concerns.

*Lionheart Gal* moves away from Sistren's more traditional form of drama, presenting fifteen accounts, taken from multiple transcribed interviews, recorded into autobiographical sketches of women from varying backgrounds. The original intent of the project was for the interviews to provide a contextual introduction to a documentation of the work of the theatre collective. As they began the interviews, however, Honor Ford-Smith explains, "Soon it was clear that the testimonies would not sit neatly into an introductory section. They refused to become supporting evidence of predetermined factors. They threatened to take over the entire project and they would not behave" (xxvii). In the end, they relinquished and changed the entire nature of the project. Thus, these texts give us an example of breaking out of the traditional boundaries of genre and creating a new form, a form that will bring about change. As the emotion and weight of the stories became apparent, three questions served as the foundation for each of the interviews, "How did you first become aware of the fact that you were oppressed as a woman? How did that experience affect your life? How have you tried to change it?" (xxvii). The result is a powerful glimpse into the experiences of a few Jamaican women.

Thus, just as the eighteenth century authors we discussed, through this distinctive mode of communication and the voices released in the text, *Lionheart Gal* constructs a distinctly feminine reality, and, as a result, a unique feminine discourse of resistance. For if, "reflection is part of the process of gaining control over one's own life," then giving voice to these narratives, providing them a platform by committing them to paper, is an act itself of reclaiming power and autonomy for the speakers (Sistren xxix).

Furthermore, by focusing on a distinctly Jamaican voice, supported by an identity that has been forged from the weight of oppression and the fires of adversity, the level and means of resistance are both intensified and shifted.

### *Identity*

Thus, on the path to understanding the feminine discourse represented in this text, we must seek to understand the nature of the identities that are revealed. The oppression that exists in the basic structure of how these women deal with “the pressures of male sexual pleasure, and their economic function as pre-capitalist resources in a system that forces them to bear the burden of working and raising children” is a defining distinctive (Carr 132). The idea of maintaining multiple identities builds a further bridge between the women of the eighteenth century and these modern voices, as they experienced similar strictures. As expressed before, these authors were never considered just authors, they were female authors, who were also wives, mothers, daughters, members of churches and social clubs, employees, citizens, and the list goes on. In addition, the editor of *Lionheart Gal* explains in the introduction that these stories look at two separate images that have become prevalent identifiers of Caribbean women as a whole, but could also be connected back to similar stereotypes of women present in the eighteenth century. These images can be seen almost as personas. On the one hand is Ni (Nanny), the “warrior woman”, and on the other is nanny, the “domesticated servant woman” (xiii).

The narrative “Red Ibo” shows the reader these two images and roles meeting head to head, and the conflict that can exist within a woman who privileges one over the other. The narrator works for the NUDT (National Union of Democratic Teachers) and

although she has experienced a variety of discriminatory instances, there is one unique situation. One evening, following a meeting, the narrator asks the General Secretary to lift a typewriter and place it in her car for her. As she states, “I had been accustomed to lifting typewriters and anything else that needed to be lifted, as a matter of course, but that evening I was dog-tired” (233). While she can tell his tone is sarcastic, his comments typify a division that is made, “The General Secreatry asked me...why I couldn’t lift it myself, strong, fighting woman that I was. I exploded” (233). The narrator shows us that while it has benefited her and the furthering of the cause to assume the Ni role, at times, she is punished for it. “Delicate women,” as she refers to them, are taken care of, “but because I was ‘strong’, I wasn’t regarded as a normal human being who could need help from other human beings from time to time” (233). A consideration also felt by Cowley’s Letitia in *The Belle’s Strategem*. Ultimately, over the course of the story, we see that the narrator, despite the struggles she faces, does not give up the fight, but also finds a way to fulfill her role both as social activist and as a mother. However, one poignant statement summarizes the conflict many Jamaican women face with men, “The whole thing seemed to me to explain why in the lives of these men there seemed to be one kind of woman for going to bed with and taking out, and another for working with in the struggle” (233).

Another illustration of the truth of these Ni/nanny symbols in the lives of actual women is apparent in the account, “Di Flowers Vase,” when the narrator describes wanting to pursue a career as either a police officer or a nurse – two roles that can be seen as representative of the two female representatives of Ni and nanny. In the end, the narrator of “Di Flowers Vase” spends time in both professions, but neither works out.

First, she decides to leave nursing because of the smell of blood, which is potentially an emotional memory response to her having broken a vase over the head of her mother's boyfriend when she was a child. Second, while pursuing the police force, she is wrongfully accused of something, though she does not tell us what, and decides to leave. The only thing she does say is that "Me never like di way way yuh haffi do what di higher heads say, whether yuh agree wid it or not" (139). Thus, she is unable to find a place in either vocation, or identity, and as she states, "After dat me get wutliss. Me did just give up and say me nah try notten again" (139). Ultimately, the narrator finds a place in writing. What the narrator does in this situation, however, is synthesize the two identities, showing that a woman, especially one who is a product of experiences such as these, assumes both essences, and her existence can be defined as the tête-à-tête between the two.

As a result of seeing these two identities at war within a woman, one might say this bifurcates her identity, but they can simultaneously reveal to the reader that existing in the liminal space of drawing on a dualistic source of autonomy and power is an ultimate source of identification and expression. In the first story, while her strength and identification with the Ni figure might be perceived as a "negative" it was only considered as such by a patriarchal point of view. The narrator, over the course of her life, found a way to negotiate between those two identities, eventually finding herself at the point where her children "would feel very proud that their mummy was 'fighting for the people'" (237). Likewise, in the second narrative, the narrator finds an identity outside the lines of either the Ni or the nanny identities, within the realm of writing. The liminal space in which she finds herself, while difficult and challenging—facing a

pregnancy without a father involved—she still finds a place and identity that she can call her own. As critic Rachel DuPlessis suggests in her article, “Writing beyond the Ending,” there is a predetermined script for women that is inevitably fulfilled, either in marriage or death. However, to “write beyond the ending” means that somehow, she finds a way for “the transgressive invention of narrative strategies, strategies that express critical dissent from dominant narrative,” which, in the end, produces “a narrative that denies or reconstructs seductive patterns of feeling that are culturally mandated, internally policed, hegemonically poised” (5). In discovering and defining a distinctly feminine identity, these women have claimed for themselves a position that is both outside and yet still a part of them. The narrator wrote a poem about her experience entitled, “Won’t go Without,”

Without a man,

I am a man’s woman.

Without a husband,

I am a wife.

Without a father,

my children must grow.

Without life, our lives must go on.

Without hope, we’re not hopeless.

Without education, we shall be educated.

Without food, we shall be fed.

Without a home, we shall be sheltered.

Without a reality, we shall emerge



from captivity.

Without all we can stand tall, firm and strong

in what we believe in.

Forever we shall be without in this world that

we're living in

But, I am determined...I won't go without. (140)

### *Voice*

What becomes apparent in reading the text is the inherent insurgence of the narratives, because of the tension present in the relationship between the content of the accounts and the form in which they are recorded. One of the ways in which this text differs from the subjects we discussed from the eighteenth century is the language utilized. Thus, while a presence and/or lack of voice is a natural part of any discussion of women and literature, with this point of location, we see these women take the conversation one step further with a distinctive element of resistance—language. In two of the stories, English is used; in eleven of the stories, solely Patwah is used, and in the other two, the narrators use both languages. In bringing Patwah, the *lingua franca*, to the forefront, these women take on a long-contested debate. Patwah, the language relegated to the lower class of Jamaica, according to author Robert Carr, can be seen as “the bearer of the poor” and “a mark of culture/class identity rigorously expelled from official discourse and the strata of the elite” (135). Carolyn Cooper goes so far as to even compare the languages as the “Creole mother tongue” and the “English father tongue” (52). In addition, there is no standard for the spelling of Patwah, thus highlighting further

the outside, less traditional nature of this work, as there is no standard for recording. I would add that by placing the distinctive, oral language of Patwah in the mouths of women, this further marginalizes the issues brought up in the stories, by the standards of the dominant culture. Through this text then, the voice of the subaltern is thus elevated and given a platform to empower a large number of the populace, what Carr refers to as the “barefoot woman” in contrast the propensity of nationalist literature to elevate the concerns of the “barefoot man” (135). To take it one step further, I believe there is a tension that exists in the oral/scribal dichotomy that is inherent, as well as the use of English and Jamaican. The editor observes in the afterword to the text that,

Taken together, the pieces represent the complexity of the society, its ambivalence, its conflicted and contradictory nature. They never completely transcend the power relations that produce society...the book attempts to make those relations strange, to de-naturalise them by naming the power relations and exposing them as part of the project. (296)

According to author Carolyn Cooper, while the use of a mixture of language is a “subversion of the authority of the literary canon,” she points out that employing an autobiographical form “articulates a feminist subversion of the authority of the literary text as fiction” (49). Furthermore, Selwyn Cudjoe states that in Black and Third World studies, there is a difference as it relates to autobiography, when it comes to understanding the “collective personal,” which is what the women of Sistren grasp here. For as critics Maggie B. Gale and Viv Gardner point out in *Auto/biography and identity: Women, Theatre and Performance*,

The ways in which women approach the autobiographic form, as writers, performers or readers, whether in the eighteenth or twenty-first century, are as influenced by the social, economic and historical positions of which the theatre event and theatre history are a part, as they are influenced by any general tendencies in autobiographical writing. (3)

However, despite the differences in approach, the autobiography “is presumed generally to be of service to the group. It is never meant to glorify the exploits of the individual, and the concerns of the collective predominate. One’s personal experiences are assumed to be an authentic expression of society” (qtd in O’Callaghan 146). As women, without the strength and camaraderie of a group, they oftentimes found themselves beaten and oppressed. Sistren’s collective purpose is to give women a place to construct for themselves an identity, a voice, and ultimately a means by which they can form a distinctly Jamaican and feminine discourse of resistance, which is exactly what *Lionheart Gal* enables them to do. The utilization of autobiography enables them to speak from a place of authority, but one that in the end benefits a collective whole, and allows them to reach out and help other women.

The story “Grandma’s Estate” illustrates the effect that not having a voice can have on an individual. Towards the end of the story, as the narrator and her grandmother are having one of their usual conversations, her grandmother suddenly begins to sob. Her emotional reaction is violent and unexpected. What they find out is that the grandmother’s father was a planter, a white man, and her mother worked in his house. Her mother had previously been married to a drunk that deserted her, but showed back up in order to sue the planter for money. Once he had the money, he took off again, so that

when the mother went to the planter for money, he said “He’d given all he could to her husband and that was that” (195). Out of shame, the mother essentially receded from society. As her daughter, witnessing that firsthand, the narrator’s grandmother vowed that nothing like that would happen to her, and it did not. However, in keeping that story to herself, the event marked her to such a degree that well over sixty years later, she is reliving the story as if it was yesterday. In response to her grandmother’s actions, the narrator states, “there was something maddening about the way she had allowed it to wither her” and “it seemed to me she had been so busy preserving the past that the present had swept past her and she hadn’t even noticed” (196).

“Ava’s Diary” is structured as the title suggests, as a diary, as opposed to a straight narrative, like the fourteen other stories in the collection. In this account, not only do we come into contact with Ava’s personal struggles, but also with Sistren’s involvement in trying to help her. Ava is in a violently abusive relationship that lasts over a decade, only the last few years of which she is a member of Sistren. Finally, after a particularly horrifying incident, the women of Sistren gather and decide that they must do one of four things, “1. Call him into a meeting to reason with him. 2. Get some other men to beat him up. 3. Get Ava out of the situation and give her as much support as possible. 4. Encourage her to take police action” (277). They decide upon a combination of the last two, despite the fact that the police generally do not take domestic violence cases seriously. In the end, Ava is able to get out on her own and her abuser moves to America. As Ava reminisces, “When a man beat yuh, it is a very embarrassing thing to talk about in public,” which echoes the thought process of many abused women who remain without a voice or the power to speak out against those that seek to dominate

them (282). In the end, despite Sistren's lack of resources and general ability to take on the situation completely, they were able to help Ava face the crisis and locate a voice that would help her to stand up for herself and her children.

### *A Distinctive Form of Discourse*

Through the exploration and expression of identities and voices that are both distinctly Jamaican and female, *Lionheart Gals* carves a specific niche in the realm of feminine discourse. While many in the feminist discussion bring up the issues inherent in identifying specific experiences as “representational” of the female experience as a whole, this text, through the recording of specific stories, both brings up the greater issues at hand while, as mentioned earlier, simultaneously not attempting to sweep universal strokes across the varied lines of marginalization. This idea becomes important as we look towards another purpose for the text, rather than just a means of identification and expression, but one that is political as well. The critic Elaine Savory Fido once stated concerning the feminine literary struggle in this region, “It strikes me that none of us really knew, when we took on this struggle, how political it is, how intertwined with social realities beyond the question of women it is” (x). Sistren's stories show that a woman's existence is distinctly political by nature of her point of location, socially, economically, and culturally. This idea is typified in “Foxy and di Macca Palace War” when the narrator states,

We discuss what is politics and how it affect woman. After we done talk ah get to feel dat di little day-to-day tings dat happen to we as women, is politics too. For instance, if yuh tek yuh pickney to hospital and it die in

yuh hand – dat is politics. If yuh do something to to yuh own child dat damage him or her fi di future, dat is politics too. If yuh man box yuh down, dat is politics. But plenty politicians don't tink dose tings have anything to do wid politics. (Sistren 253)

As critic Evelyn O'Callaghan reminds us, "Feminist theory...maintains the integral and necessary relation of the private and the public, the personal and the economic" (147). For these women, once your existence has been defined for you in a variety of capacities, once you lose the power to determine your own identity, voice, or fate, everything eventually becomes both economic and political. In addition, by choosing to bring their personal lives and stories into the public forum, they are creating a distinctly feminine political discussion that cannot be ignored. As critic Robert Carr suggests, "these testimonials suggest a counternarrative, that is, that the people themselves push for particular institutions and new kinds of representation, which is to say that they debate policy" (128). By creating a specific feminine discourse that allows them to explore a feminine reality, the women of Sistren, through their "rebel consciousness" decenter, for the Jamaican woman, the entire concept of social change (Carr 136).

In that decentering, rather than attempting to work through the structure that ultimately seems to fail them time and again, they go straight to the women themselves, helping them directly, building a community, and looking to enact social change from the inside out. The concept of social change taking place as a methodical, reformative process, instigated by the individuals within the system, while not revolutionary, is no less transformative or effective. Carol Boyce Davies points out a distinctive element of Caribbean culture, specifically, "the way in which the Caribbean women fight for their

families” (xv). The implication of such an idea is that they are fighting for a whole family, not merely for women to be elevated beyond men, which is the implied initiative of many radical feminists. As Davies states, “the kind of feminism which supports women, good, bad, or indifferent, seems to me to create as many problems as it solves” (“Preface” xv). Thus, while there is a definite need for the recognition of the oppression and suffering of women, ideas of proponents such as Peggy Antrobus who stated that “a feminist is anyone, man or woman, who attends to the issue of female oppression and recognises that it is real” also emerge as a less radical, but in some ways, a more balanced approach (qtd in Davies “Preface” xv). Less radical, however, does not mean less effective, rather one can see this as a more lasting and effective means of restructuring society, one that supports all aspects and roles of family life, especially that of both mother and father.

As a result, one of the emerging modes of social change that becomes apparent is motherhood. While one might not immediately consider this role as a place through which social and political change can take place, consider for a moment the position of power a mother occupies. In each of these stories, the mother takes a prominent role, even if she is absent or abusive, and each narrator seems to fixate, in some form, on the role of mother and the idea of mothering. Thus, they explore the idea that “the meaning of being a woman, coming into your own, thus hinges on (knowing) the meaning of your/a mother’s life” (Carr 141). Naturally, some questions arise, do oppressed women find their resistive identity, ultimately, by raising their children to think differently? Is their freedom realized purely through the lives of the next generation?

In the story “Rock Stone a River Bottom No Known Sun Hot,” the narrator’s mother experiences an abusive relationship. When the man passes away from pneumonia, she raises the narrator on her own. Her mother consistently reminds her, “Depend upon yuh own income” and lists off the things that she must have for herself, including a bed, iron, and wash pan, because you do not want to have to depend on anyone else for that (46). Her mother was a hard woman, yet, at the end of the story, the narrator contemplates a woman’s power and her mother’s role in her life,

All she can do is mek sure she and di daughter can reason good. Me madda never tell me ‘thanks’ yet. She never tek notten from me. She always gimme. All dem lickle tings rest pon me mind when me member how she used to say, ‘Be independent, fi yuh pon uh own. (58)

Although her mother’s legacy in her life was not one of warmth or a nurturing spirit, her mother cared for her and saw to it that her child would be equipped to look after herself once she was gone.

Once again, in “Country Madda Legacy,” the narrator is forced to leave the countryside where her mother lives so that she can live with her father and stepmother in town. In this case, the narrator has nothing against her living arrangement, but “but to dis day I still resent di way Mama haffi live and di situation dat cause me to leave her and me bredda and sister dem” (63). Through the rest of the story, we learn that after her father beats her for talking to a man, she gets the courage to pack up and leave. She works all different kinds of jobs, until she finds a place working with Sistren. At the end of her story, she states powerfully that “Me start life over plenty time. Dat a no notten to me...Me determine no fi live how me madda live” (71). Thus, while her mother was not



able to experience freedom of choice, she raised a daughter that was willing to step out and take a chance on living the life she determined for herself, despite the hardship.

As the reader can see throughout these stories, the role of the mother is a prominent and powerful point of location and image. Although not all of the mothers represented what we might desire a mother figure to be, the stamp of that role is visible throughout each of the narrator's recollections. While the introduction to the text states what is true for some women, "Becoming a mother is traumatic psychologically and materially, and so are the 'penalties' for being a mother," there is also the potential for motherhood to be beautiful and redemptive, despite the circumstances surrounding the situation (xix). The conclusion of the story "A Working Woman" sums up the vision of many of the mother figures in this collection, as well as a vision for the feminine discourse of resistance that we have been discussing,

Dem have maternity leave for women now, which never exist when ah was working first time. On a whole ah tink dis generation tek tings more serious den we. So a tink dem will achieve more dan we achieve because we achieve more dan our parents. If dem come togedder and keep on demand what dem want to see change and work hard to get it change, dem will get someweh. (87)

While there has been some critical resistance to aspects of *Lionheart Gal*, mainly as it relates to gaps that are seen within the text, Honor Ford-Smith makes the point, "I propose that social movements and the cultural work they produce are never pure spaces of resistance, and that they do not produce pure ruptures with domination" (294). Furthermore, the multi-layered nature of engaging in a feminine discourse, surfaces yet

even more potential issues. As critic Chandra Mohanty states, “It is only by understanding the *contradictions* inherent in women’s location within various structures that effective political action and challenges can be devised” (208). Texts that serve as gateways to dialogue and opening forums of exploration in new realms concerning society and politics are going to incite debate, as well as not provide total solutions. However, as the critic François Lionnet termed it, engaging in “a spirit of dialogue and exchange” is an integral part of entering into conversations that will allow for change to eventually take root (6).

*Conclusion: The Sistren Perspective*

*Lionheart Gal* allows the reader to experience a feminine reality, from a feminine perspective, and contrary to our natural tendencies to take pity on those who have experienced lives fraught by heartaches and atrocities such as these, the “testimonies are so animated, so dramatic, so filled with humour and ‘spunks’ that it is pure condescension to react with pity; over and over, one senses the aptness of the title, *Lionheart Gal*” (O’Callaghan 146). Ultimately, the social change that *Sistren* lays the foundation for, provides women a place to identify themselves, locate their voice, and determine where they fit into the larger spectrum of their society, carrying forward the vision set forth by our eighteenth-century playwrights. It is a movement of empowerment. As Ford-Smith states, “Their lives here show that women are actively creating solutions, that they are not passively awaiting outside agitators to “stir them up” into action” (xxx).

*Chapter IV: Understanding & Placing the Texts*

After considering a portion of the work of four prominent female playwrights of the eighteenth century and Sistren, the distinctive voices and identities they developed give rise to the questions, “Why are these texts important?” and “What should we do with them?” In recent decades, with the emergence of interest in recovering works by female authors, more and more women have been brought to the forefront of literary studies. As author Tracy C. Davis suggests that this particular period of playwriting, “like professional sports in the twentieth century, was the domain of women *if we know where to look for them*” (20). The phrase “if we know where to look for them” can be considered both a telling, as well as defining phrase. The implication of such an idea is that one must be searching for these women in order to come into contact with their work, as well as biographical information, as evidenced by the fact that most of what we have has only recently been discovered. Our responsibility as researchers, literary critics, and theatre practitioners is to recover and reinstate the relevancy of these texts. Their importance lies not just in the fact that they are a part of history, but because they are the remnants of the foundation, the origin of the feminine resistive voice. For example, author Juliette Merritt points out that “history must engage with the question of women’s evolving cultural authority as, in increasing numbers, they became producers, consumers, and publishers of print culture” (5-6). If we do not engage, know, and understand the foundation, that leads to a lack of knowledge as to where we are in the present and how we got here, and then we are ill equipped to project and build a vision for the future. Thus, we have responsibility to recapture this inheritance of resistance that has nearly been lost. In addition, by placing them within the same context of consideration, we

move them into a larger context of a feminine resistance theatre, as opposed to leaving them relegated to their particular time and place within the annals of history. As a result, they become relevant once again, as we consider the future of feminine resistance theatre and the direction of the female voice on stage.

Once we have recaptured and explored these texts, what should we do with them? First of all, as a result of bringing these performative texts to the forefront, the modern question emerges—where do we put them now? The first place that these texts could emerge would be the university classroom. While providing a unique perspective into this window of history, these texts also provide a truly diverse look at culture, something that modern literary criticism has come to deeply value. Secondly, to review a point that was explored earlier in this study, with any dramatic piece that has survived centuries, the reaction is often to purely allow the resurfacing of the text alone stand as the testament to the author's voice and intent. What must actually occur in order to fully grasp a play's depth and breadth is to walk that text through the entire performative process. Thus, while analyzing and discussing these texts is necessary and beneficial, there is also a degree of revival that can and should occur, all the way to the vocalization of these texts. Am I proposing that all of these plays should be staged with elaborate sets, large casts, to packed houses? Not necessarily. For as Paula R. Backscheider points out,

Although I fully recognize the impossibility of reconstructing a past event (performance), of determining what appealed to a long-dead audience (what needs and desires were met, what specifically triggered strong responses), and of articulating the complex relationship between social life and works of art, a wealth of evidence survives that permits new

discoveries about how they were experienced and provides a commentary on the conditions of existence of the problem of interpretation itself. (xiv)

Even the act of a small group of people vocalizing these works, breathing life into them, not only honors the original intent of the text, but can also serve to reveal their power and relevance in a way that mere reading cannot.

As a result, the problem of genre emerges. Through the examination thus far, gender and genre quickly become inseparable concepts that need to be discussed in light of one another, in order to understand their symbiotic relationship within this context of social, cultural, and political resistance. By their actions in writing, creating a distinctive feminine form of discourse and resistance, these women exhibit that their gender prohibits the classification and creation of a specified, isolated genre. To create a unified, streamlined genre, would assume that these women could be classified uniformly, whereas the nature of their resistance is in developing an individual sense of voice and identity.

If we are looking at the need for a distinctly feminine discourse in order to create a space for a female voice to be heard, then inherently, a feminine theatre will be different than a masculine theatre. Especially with a feminine focus on blurring of binary lines, we must keep in mind the inherent difference in writing, as well as expression, between the genders. The focus may not actually be to bring all the issues to a close, with a glorious climax and a single, absolute conclusion. In his foundational work *The Theatre of Revolt*, Robert Brustein claims the following, “Dramatic art is not identical with reality, but rather proceeds along a parallel plane; and dramatic revolt, therefore, is always much more total than the programs of political agitators or social reformers.” I

agree with this statement, however, as he continues, Brustein reveals the limitations of his worldview concerning modern theatre, “The modern dramatist is essentially a metaphysical rebel, not a practical revolutionary; whatever his personal political conventions, his art is the expression of a spiritual condition. For he is a militant of the ideal, an anarchic individualist, concerned with the impossible rather than the possible; and his discontent extends to the very roots of existence” (9). My primary concern with his observation is that he is primarily focused on the work of male modern authors.

While his reading might be true of their texts, I do not believe that to be the over-arching case for female authors. In fact, as we have witnessed throughout this study, especially in the modern work of Sistren, these women found a voice that shed light on their individual situation, but also with the broader perspective of bringing about social and cultural change as a result. While the male perspective has been fiercely individualistic throughout history, the female perspective tends to be far more diffused and collective. That collective approach and sense of a diffused identity automatically created a unique perspective, as a result of the variety of roles a woman is called to fulfill. Thus, in contrast to the limitations of the modern male dramatist focused on revolt, as proposed by Brustein, I believe a female view of resistance art is poised to provide a gateway to a forum in which issues can continue to be tested, debated, and explored. A forum that theatre can and should naturally step into, one that opens the floor for discussion, the consideration of multiple viewpoints, and the ability to learn about different perspectives in a way that literature cannot. Once again, those varying perspectives are the reason the women of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the women of Sistren fit together within this conversation, providing a unique perspective into our past.

*Chapter VI: Conclusion—A Feminine Discourse of Resistance Theatre*

What these women model for the modern reader, literary critic, and theatre practitioner, is that a feminine perspective of theatre is both valid and can have a significantly different point of view from the masculine, without sacrificing significance or relevancy. Paula Backscheider's conclusion is applicable to our study,

How people imagine themselves and their 'stories' is always the issue. In these examples, we can see how writing can be a civil discourse and mode of imaginative exploration and radical discovery. More important, we can see how examining texts produced during periods of turmoil and instability reveals new things about literature and its social contexts, how writers' new orchestrations of literary languages can create radically original and culturally important texts, and how literature functions in a free society. (241)

Taking a look at our past, to shine light on our current state of affairs within the present theatrical world, points once again to the fact that this discussion of gender is as relevant now as ever. For example, despite the fact that theatre, especially in our modern age, tends to be one of the most progressive art forms, a female did not win a Tony Award for Best Director until 1998. While modern gender debates continue, our considerate attentiveness to the various means of debate and discussion can foster a specifically feminine view of resistance theatre and what it can mean for a community. Embracing the inherently different natures of masculine and feminine theatre is the only way to recognize, accept, and then attempt to define a realistic future, as well as fostering a space for lively, dynamic discussions to take place. That being said, as author Ketu Katrak

observes, “Rather than glorify any and all resistance, I ask, resistance to what end? How does a resistant action or non-action enable a protagonist to grow, change, learn or be destroyed?” (2). As we look to the future, continuing this tradition of resistance, we must maintain focus on the end goal—the transformation and growth both of the individual and society. In addition, resistance and transformation can emerge in a variety of forms, as those we studied exemplified. Some may never see the freedom they fought for, but their children reap the benefits. Others may never see that the words they write on a scrap of paper or utter from a forgotten stage bring about a social, political, and cultural transformation within their community. Our responsibility as citizens is to fight against injustice, be knowledgeable about our community, and create an environment where we are willing to engage in the culture around us. Our responsibility as academics demands that we relentlessly pursue that which history and certain man-made standards have intended to conceal from us. Our responsibility as theatre practitioners lies in both recognizing the academic and artistic value of the intentionally recovering lost works, but being willing to open the theatre space as a forum for discussion to take place, from a variety of perspectives, specifically giving space to those marginalized voices. Critic Annette Kolodny refers to the realm of gender debates as a minefield, and as she touches on the fact that we have a responsibility not merely to discover and analyze lost texts, but put into action all that we fight for in the intellectual realm “so that others, after us, may literally dance through the minefield” (22). When the female voice is unable to carve out a place, the ability of that work to have an impact is limited, as the entire other half of humanity has been detached and removed from the conversation. Our concerns are human in nature, thus our perspectives require both expressions of humanity—male and



female—to be represented. Then, and only then, will cultures be truly equipped to embrace transformation and change.

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